

Larry Bivins, *St. Cloud Times*

WASHINGTON — A new round of budget talks awaits Rep. Michele Bachmann and her fellow members of Congress, some of whom may have heard from constituents while home for a week about proposed cuts in a bill the House of Representatives passed in February.

Call it a fiscal restraining order. In adhering to a 2010 campaign pledge, House Republicans pushed through a measure called a continuing resolution to keep the government running through September, when the fiscal year ends, that calls for reducing nondiscretionary spending by \$61 billion. The Democrat-controlled Senate has rejected the bill.

Meanwhile, two temporary government funding measures have been signed, with the latest one set to expire April 8. Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle express frustration over their inability to reach agreement on a bill for the rest of the year, but there is a deep divide over how much to rein in government spending and where cuts should be made.

Many of the cuts in the House bill are to programs that have enjoyed support on both sides of the political aisle. But Republican leaders say everything should be on the table as a start to reducing the nation's \$14 trillion debt.

"We held no program harmless from our spending cuts, and virtually no area of government escaped this process unscathed," House Appropriations Committee Chairman Harold Rogers, R-Ky., said when the bill passed. "While these choices were difficult to make, we strived to spread the sacrifice fairly, weeding out waste and excess, with a razor-sharp focus on making the most out of every tax dollar."

What's at stake

The proposed cuts would have a sweeping impact in Minnesota. The state would lose an estimated 14,200 jobs if the Republican spending plan is enacted, including 1,750 community

health center jobs, according to the Senate Democratic Policy and Communications Center Committee.

Among the hits the Gopher State would take are \$84 million in Pell Grant college aid funding, affecting 147,000 students; \$35 million in funds for clean water and drinking water revolving funds; \$39 million in community development block grants and at least \$24.7 million for low-income housing programs, according to an analysis by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Minnesota also would lose about \$2 million for programs dealing with mental health and substance abuse, \$2 million in law enforcement assistance funding and \$21.4 million for employment and job training under the Workforce Investment Act.

The job training cuts could be a big blow to efforts in the state to help displaced workers and others seeking employment, said Monte Hanson, spokesman for the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development.

The department uses WIA money to retrain laid-off workers as well as enhance their job-seeking skills, such as preparing resumes, Hanson said. The main goal, he said, is "helping people get re-employed. That's an important program that we definitely want to keep going."

Veto threat

The budget battle resumes under the specter of a government shutdown if Democrats and Republicans fail to resolve differences.

President Barack Obama has threatened to veto any bill that "undermines critical priorities or national security through funding levels or restrictions, contains earmarks, or curtails the drivers of long-term economic growth and job creation while continuing to burden future generations with deficits."

Democrats and their allies contend that Republicans have used a meat cleaver rather than a scalpel and that they are trying to rein in the debt on the backs of poor and moderate-income Americans. They cite the Pell Grant cuts as one example, as well as cuts to Head Start and other education funding, home-heating assistance, job training and weatherization funds.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a group that advocates for moderate- and low-income Americans, questioned how Republicans justify their contention that the nation cannot afford \$1.1 billion to continue Head Start funding for 157,000 disadvantaged children after they brokered a deal with the Obama administration in December to extend tax cuts for the wealthy that will cost billions.

"The priorities represented by the proposed cuts in H.R. 1 and the enacted cuts for the wealthy are upside-down," the CBPP said in its analysis, which includes a state-by-state breakdown of cuts in selected areas.

Rep. Betty McCollum, D-St. Paul, agreed. She cited the work of an economist who was a 2008 campaign adviser to Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., that concluded the cuts would eliminate 700,000 jobs nationwide.

"Republicans want to borrow money so the top 2 percent of Americans receive extra tax cuts, and they are asking middle-class families in Minnesota to sacrifice educating their children, access to health care and safe roads," McCollum said.

'A myth'

Brian Riedl, a budget analyst for the conservative Heritage Foundation, said the critics are exaggerating the focus of the cuts and their impact.

"It is a myth that low-income families are being targeted in these cuts," Riedl said. Spending on many domestic programs soared during the past decade, and even after the cuts, he said, "anti-poverty spending and education spending will be at their highest levels ever."

Bachmann, R-Stillwater, who has vowed to reject any government funding bill that fails to rescind spending for the health care law, said the nation's looming \$1.5 trillion deficit presents a compelling case for across-the-board cuts.

"We are in a spending crisis," Bachmann said, "and everything must be on the table."